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SUBJECT: BREAKFAST IN NAN, DINNER IN DIEN BIEN PHU

REF: CHIANG MAI 93 (GOLDEN TRIANGLE TO BECOME GOLDEN GATEWAY

¶1. Summary: Nan, a remote northern province that suffered through some of the fiercest fighting during Thailand's communist insurgency in the 1960s and 1970s, now aims to become northern Thailand's "door to Indochina". Situated on the shortest route between Hanoi and Bangkok, local officials envision a time when their province will be the jumping off point for road trips to Laos and northern Vietnam as well as a symbol of reconciliation. End summary

¶2. During a recent Consulate visit to Nan, Provincial Governor Prinya Panthong predicted a day when travelers will have "breakfast in Nan, dinner in Dien Bien Phu". As a first step to this goal, the Nan Chamber of Commerce set out Nov. 22 by road for Dien Bien Phu, in northern Vietnam. Under current road conditions the journey took two full days, but the 42 travelers returned optimistic about tourism possibilities and the chance to connect with ethnic Tai speaking groups in the Dien Bien Phu area. Camera crews from iTV and Channel 5 filmed the ground-breaking journey for future broadcast.

¶3. With the neighboring provinces of Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai focused on increased trade with China along the future highway from Kunming to Bangkok (reftel), Gov. Prinya described to Consulate visitors a different "cultural road" across Indochina. In fact, the UNESCO World Heritage site of Luang Prabang lies only 152 kilometers east of the Nan border, a tantalizing but deceptive distance considering that a traveler currently needs nearly three hours to drive from the provincial capital to the border point. Tourism ambitions are further hampered by the fact that Laos does not currently permit third country nationals to cross the border from Nan.

¶4. While the Chamber of Commerce journey transcended international animosities from the Indochina war era, a memorial in the province to Thailand's own insurgency signals reconciliation within the country. Memories of Nan's history as a former stronghold of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) were revived on December 11 last year when Gen. Surayud Chulanont, then Privy Councilor and now appointed Prime Minister, presided over the opening ceremony of the People's History Building and the Lawa-Hmong Phu Payak Museum in Chaloe Phrakiat district. The event and the government-financed museum near the former CPT base commemorated the war during the 1970s and 1980s and honored those, including insurgents, who died fighting. Surayud was invited to preside over the ceremony because his father, Lt-Colonel Payom Chulanont or "Comrade Khamtan", was a key communist cadre based in Nan.

¶5. The reappearance in the Thai political arena of several former communist activists, including current Thai Rak Thai acting party leader Chaturon Chaisaeng, combined with sympathetic articles about Surayud's father, has led to renewed discussion of the former insurgency. Surayud himself made a connection between that era and today during a 2005 trip to the

southern provinces by pointing out that "Thailand had a problem like this before. This will be the second time. The first time was the communist movement. Simply put, there was injustice in the country and it created conditions for communism to grow."

¶6. Comment: While most of the trade and investment excitement in northern Thailand is focused on China, tiny Nan is ready to take advantage of its history and location by turning toward its Indochina neighbors and former enemies. AmCit development experts working in the border region contend that the route is "more promising" and "more likely" than the proposed road through Chiang Khong in Chiang Rai province. Although the border crossing remains closed to third-country nationals for now, a sign post reminds travelers that Luang Prabang is only 152 kilometers away, with China's Mengla 295 kilometers and Dien Bien Phu 406 kilometers.

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